



Workshop: War and Identity in the Balkans and the Middle East
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Author: Behar Sadriu, behar.sadriu@soas.ac.uk

Title: War on Terror Logics, the Syria Imbroglio and the Balkans

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This paper will build on my earlier work (Sadriu 2017) which looked at how debates about Syria War impacted state and society in the Albanian parts of the Balkans. That essay gave a broad overview of events between 2011 and late 2014 and charted state responses to the war in Syria. It explored how imams in Kosovo and Albania came to view the war as well as state-level responses to developments, especially the phenomena of Albanians going to battle against the forces of Bashar al-Assad. Analysing these, I was able to show how violent ruptures in the Arab Muslim world impacted on two of Europe's largest Muslim majority countries. The aim with this present paper will be to situate the case study more firmly in other studies exploring the ways in which the so-called 'war on terror' has transformed the world around us as well as other related literature on the ubiquitousness of war in society and its transformative impact.¹ My 2017 paper argued that war in Syria has accelerated a process, begun since the fall of Communism and Yugoslavia in the 1990s, whereby Muslim Albanians in the Balkans are being re-connected with a more cosmopolitan vision of their past.²

The paper here takes this further and argues that the expansion and institutionalisation of the war on terror as the *modus operandi* of US foreign policy when it comes to dealing with Muslim activism – and especially the so-called 'foreign fighters' phenomenon – both homogenizes the potential Muslim troublemaker as a *transnational threat* while simultaneously seeking to neatly compartmentalize them into *rigid nation-state borders* by supporting local politicians who work to achieve this. Acutely aware of their own subordinate position in the global political order of things, local political actors in Kosovo and Albania become willing participants in disciplining their respective Muslim populations. At times this was more vicious – mass, highly politicized arrests as seen in Kosovo in 2014 – and at other times (similar to other European states) we see the expansion of 'countering violent extremism' programs. However, the expansion of the programs reveals the tendency to infantilize Balkan

¹ Inspiration for better thinking about the productive capacity of war has come from tutoring the 'War and International' class at SOAS University of London. The course is convened by Mark Laffey and Sutha Nadarajah.

² A caveat is needed here regarding whether we should consider the communist period as a sharp rupture. I will elaborate on this later.



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Muslims as incapable of addressing their own issues without outside assistance. With these issues in mind, it is possible to bring the Balkans – Europe – and the Middle East in conversation with each other, when we consider how US war on terror policies permeate around the globe. In fact, it is argued that the both the Syria War and ensuing securitization of the Balkan Muslims makes such a conversation inevitable.

I will first recall the original essay's main findings before turning to some theoretical considerations inspired by a number of literatures dealing with war and the 'war on terror' more broadly. Finally, I will consider these claims in light of events since.

Recalling Cosmopolitan Pasts

The argument put forth in my *Grasping the Syrian War, a view from Albanians in the Balkans* (2017) was that the phenomena of volunteers going to wage war in Syria represent only the most extreme – but by no means only – example of a process whereby Albanians are violently reintegrating into the affairs of the wider Muslim world. The most salient themes debated by imams to mass audiences between 2011 and 2015 included not only the issue of violent extremism, the involvement of Albanian fighters in the war, but frequently also the issue of Muslim Albanian identity more broadly, the concept of jihad (Albanian.: xhihad) and Islamic eschatology. This was interesting mainly because of the ways it threatened the standard Albanian nationalist mythology which has been built up especially during the communist period, one that was intended to demarcate an Albanian subject position firmly rooted inside a Europe that was understood as secular and modern.

That mythology was a self-orientalising one that attempted to de-otherise Albanians through narratives of belonging to Europe and the ancientness of the nation (see Sulstarova 2007; 2012). Invariably, this involved a downplaying if not outright erasure of the nation's intimate historic relations to Islam and cosmopolitan centres such as Istanbul, Cairo, Damascus and others (Norris 1993). Resistance to such narratives was inevitable and ongoing, Piro Rexhepi has noted, if still remaining outside of mainstream view (2017). With the Syria War a new type of activism came to the fore challenging mainstream nationalist views. Softer, though no less profound indicators of this included the development of subaltern/subcultures in the arts, both audio and visual, which sought to challenge narrow definitions of the Albanian



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nation. Popular eulogies and even rap constructions celebrated fallen shaheeds (martyrs³) and lambasted local politicians for their anti-Islamic policies. Seeing this necessitated moving away from writing about social processes that ignore the more hidden-from-view sources of identity creation.

The political class in both Kosovo and Albania largely repudiated such activism and tried to contain it. The Syria War, despite being fought 1000s of kilometres away, in this way highlighted a profound disconnect between the ways in which your average Muslim and the government want to view the world: the former are increasingly made aware of their past as part of a global Islamic state intimately connected to the Middle East and North Africa, whereas the latter largely adopts the securitized frames of reference in relation to the region and Islam emanating from policy circles in Europe and the US.

Data used:

To show the above, I analysed 46 (YouTube) videos directly relevant to this research, the overwhelming majority lectures by imams. Second, I relied on online government websites and news portals. The Albanian language is the medium of exchange here and all share intense interactions across state borders (more pronounced for Islamic religious leaders), such that debates in one place are listened to and come to affect social conditions in another. This dynamic is made easier, thanks to the Internet, with, for example, Kosovar imams becoming popular among Muslims in Albania and vice versa.

The Historical Development of the Muslim Communities in Albania and Kosovo

It is necessary to give brief background information on the two different Islamic community structures which I focused on as well as to appreciate the legacy of early secularisation trends

³ *Shaheed* has an expansive meaning, but in this context it refers to one who has died literally ‘fighting in the cause of God’. It is close to the Christian concept of martyr though a shaheed is not typically one who has died in a state of weakness.



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in Albania *vis a vis* Kosovo.⁴ With the outbreak of the Balkan Wars in 1912-13 and the Ottoman Islamic defeat, the *de jure* creation of ‘Albania’ by the great powers still saw around 2/3 of the Albanian speaking areas left outside of these borders. A brutal colonial presence was established particularly in Kosovo as Albanian Muslims were systematically murdered and many driven out of their homes. Sizeable colonies from Serbia and Montenegro were brought in to alter the ethno-religious balance in many areas (for more, see Cana 1997; Pllana 2001; Krstić 1928; Pribićević 1996; Obradović 1981; Ristić 1958). Albania’s *ulema* (Islamic scholars) were officially separated from the Shaikh-ul Islam, or ‘grand imam’ in Istanbul (in the year 1923); and after disbanding the Sharia (Islamic) courts, Albania’s ruler King Zog also changed the date of public holidays (moved from Friday to Sunday) and encouraged Western dress (Rocca [1990] 1994). Local imams were forced to ‘Albanianize’ religious services. In Kosovo – as in Macedonia with its sizeable Albanian minority – which was dominated by Serbia, the process of forced secularization was slower. Although Islamic Communities here were attacked, and like in Bosnia had many properties seized and restrictions on Islamic practises enforced, the regime was not as brutal as in Albania (which banned religion entirely). This is mainly because the different regimes there (whether Serbia or Yugoslav) were reluctant to attack religious institutions too viciously, fearing local rebellion.

Broadly speaking, two parallel, but different, processes of secularization occurred among Albanians in the different countries. Political and intellectual elites in both countries became more secular as Communist regimes came to power after WWII. To be sure, the brand of Communism practiced in Kosovo (now under Yugoslavia) differed from the strict Marxist-Leninism of Albania. Nonetheless, Islam underwent a process of becoming *localized* in both places, in that Albanians in Yugoslavia, as in Albania itself, became less connected to intellectual and other developments in the broader Muslim world.⁵ There was also an attempt, as in Turkey and elsewhere, to ethnicize Islam: only officially sanctioned scholars who promoted an ‘Albanian Islam’ were allowed (Jazexhiu 2011; Endresen 2012). The Islamic communities also saw their precious *waqf* (pious endowments) expropriated. These had been used to fund educational and other activities (Hennigan 2004) and both communities fell into

⁴ The Islamic religious leaders I examine are part of Albania’s Islamic Community “KMSH” (Komuniteti Mysliman i Shqipërisë) and Kosovo’s Islamic Community “BIK” (Bashkësia Islame e Kosovës).

⁵ As Piro Rexhepi (2017) has noted this process was hardly uniform. Contacts remained throughout the communist period. Though it is clear that in Albania this was made increasingly impossible as the dictator Enver Hoxha tightening his hold over the country. Kosovars maintained more contact with the outside world through immigration to Turkey and elsewhere.



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poverty, without the option of traveling abroad to study. With the collapse of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s and the first elections in Albania in 1991 religious freedoms returned, Albanian students began travelling abroad for education and returned to preach.

Debating the Syria War

The Syria War (2011– present) came at a time when such Islamic activism had reached a stage of maturation, with imams enjoying not only expanded freedoms and supporters, but a political climate, especially in Kosovo, where a number of conservative political parties were consistently attracting more and more voters. The governments in Kosovo and Albania took a predictable course in affirming their commitment to Western security agendas during the Syrian War (as part of their wider agenda of EU and NATO membership). In the beginning, this meant Kosovar politicians supporting the uprising, even welcoming opposition Syrian groups to the country, though by late 2013 and 2014 political elites began to cast the war as completely foreign and having little to do with Albanians. In this response a model Albanian subject was produced: nominally Muslim, yet secular and concerned only with imitating policy choices fashioned in the West. The production of this Albanian subject as detached entirely from the Syrian quagmire was tested, however, especially in the latter half of 2013 as images were beamed globally of Albanians in Syria taking a disturbing role in the violence being perpetrated by groups like ISIS.

The response of the Kosovo and Albania governments was to clamp down further on Islamic personalities and institutions deemed to be dragging the Albanian nation into ‘foreign wars’ and damaging the reputation of their states.⁶ This culminated in new legal measures penalizing those who wished to fight abroad and the arrest and harassment of popular Islamic figures.⁷ Such an approach was both foolhardy and alienated large segments of the population, as many commentators denounced the approach as knee-jerk and sensationalist.

Initially, however, imams had used the Syria War as an opportunity to remind Albanians of their historical ties to the Muslim world. The image of Syria or ‘al-Sham’⁸ became a key

⁶ The irony here is that their knee-jerk reaction perpetuated negative stereotypes, something which I cover below.

⁷ I cover this in more detail in Sadriu 2017. Suffice it to say that these popular imams were all found not guilty and today a more serious discussion is being had about the positive contribution of the Islamic Community in such debates.

⁸ ‘Sham’ or ‘Bilad al-Sham’ (Ar.: بلاد الشام) denotes a region, roughly corresponding to today’s occupied



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theme used by imams to reassert the importance of Islamic geographies as part of their identity as Muslim Albanians. This was made easier by referencing to audiences the thousands of Albanians who had settled there in the early twentieth century (Mufaku 1990) and who continued to maintain contacts with Albanian students studying in the Arab-Muslim world (Rexhepi 2017). The question here arises why we should place so much importance on the Syrian War when imams had arguably always promoted such cosmopolitan narratives in the post-communist period, if not before?

The argument made is that the Syrian War produced a number of distinct opportunities. First, it gave the religious scholars and preachers unprecedented media coverage and – though largely hostile – this meant an increased viewership for their online material. This can be gleaned via YouTube analytical tools where a noticeable spike in viewership can be seen in 2014, even for those videos released earlier. Many Albanian imams had intimate knowledge of the Arab world, having spent their student days there, and were therefore frequently called on by the media. Nonetheless, as with the state bodies in Albania and Kosovo, it is also clear that particularly in 2014 imams began to reconfigure the ways in which they presented the Syrian War to their audiences. In this period, imams attempted to refocus the attention of believers to local issues, especially in the face of fierce media harassment and clear instances of government-led Islamophobia. In the final analysis, however, a more cosmopolitan understanding of what it means to be a Muslim Albanian was produced. Such processes are also being seen elsewhere in the Balkans (see the case of Bosnia in Mesaric 2017).

What we are left in all of this is the opportunity to more closely evaluate how war produces opportunities for actors to come to the fore and question status quo conceptions of identity. It also forces us to dismantle arbitrary scholarly borders that neatly compartmentalize regions and regional focuses. There are several other functions to this.

Firstly, violence generated by war cannot be limited to the battlefield where most of the killing takes place. In other words we need to question what the true boundaries of war are. A rich literature on this exists already. Dan Nixon and his discussion of slow violence is instructive (2011). In his examination of the first Gulf War and the widespread use of depleted-uranium and its aftereffects we begin to see a picture of the war that is far removed from the way we typically think of modern military engagements as a triumph of high-tech weaponry,

Palestinian territories, Syria, Lebanon, and a part of Turkey. These are mentioned numerous times in Islamic sources (that is, the Qur'an and hadith literature). See a typical lecture on this by Qadhi [2012] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gVJvx3uENAI>.



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military bodies splattered in surgical strikes that quickly ended Saddam's misadventures in Kuwait. By considering the lasting impact of depleted uranium we are forced to challenge military body counts that consistently underestimate true toll of high tech wars. In other words, what do we do about victims who suffer from depleted uranium years later? Further afield, what is the true toll in Hiroshima if people still born with deformities? Who is counting these deaths from cluster bombs, mines, food poisoning? Take Algeria as another example, where decades after France's brutal colonial presence was ejected people still suffer from cancers, blindness and birth defects as a result of nuclear testing. It begs the question, when did the war – whose "main purpose and outcome is injuring" (Scarry 1985) – actually end? Other ways to think about this is trauma and the way it is carried through generations and among diaspora communities. In the case we are interested in, we saw state oppression directed against those perceived to be perpetuating the war in Syria (that is, practising Muslims).

In Kosovo this included massive arrests, show trials, violation of media standards, the closing down of charities and targeting of political opposition.⁹ There was also massive pressure on the official Islamic Community (BIK) to clamp down on imams delivering lectures online and in other forums. It is as if the war in Syria presented an opportunity for the political class and their media allies to discipline local manifestations of Islamic revival and reaffirm their 'Europeanness' or 'Westernness'. In other words, a class of people saw the war in Syria and its ramifications as an opportunity to successfully reset a decade of activism that imams, many who had successfully preached and won the trust of a large segment of the population under the purview of BIK structures.¹⁰

The space for political activism that questioned the hegemonic control exercised by western actors in the country was narrowed more broadly to encompass activities carried out by other, non Islamically-inspired actors too. Left-wing opposition movement 'Lëvizja VETËVENDOSJE!' (VV) activists, for example, were more frequently targeted and tried

⁹ The arbitrary closure of a number of charities in Kosovo was wide-ranging such that local activists described this as a "tradition in communist countries where the regime with a singular ideology dominates". Available at 'Vazhdon terrori ndaj muslimanëve, mbyllen mbi 10 OJQ' at <https://besimtari.com/vazhdon-terrori-ndaj-muslimaneve-mbyllen-mbi-10-ojq/> [accessed 12 04 2018]. All Islamic Community of Kosovo imams were found not guilty of various charged including threatening the constitutional order and inciting to violence. Fuad Ramiqi, a politician who ran a conservative Islamic party 'LISBA' was also found not guilty in May 2017. See 'Fuad Ramiqi dhe 4 Imamë Deklarohen të Pafajshëm', available at <http://kallxo.com/fuad-ramiqi-dhe-4-imame-deklarohen-te-pafajshem/> [accessed 10 04 2018]

¹⁰ BIK consistently features as one of the most trusted institution in Kosovo. See KCSS Report, Kosovo Security Barometer. Citizens' perceptions on violent extremism. 2017. Available at http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/KSB_MENTORI_FINAL_605403.pdf [accessed 10 04 2018]



under terrorism laws.¹¹ Just as the insidious nature of the war on terror in the US came to haunt journalists and protest movements in the form of a transformed policing mission intended to safeguard capital and entrenched economic interests (Laffey and Weldes 2005) so too in Kosovo the climate allowed the state to clampdown on potential opposition – definitely Islamic ones, but also more widely groups like VV, as ‘terrorism’ entered the lexicon of political point scoring.

In a similar vein, another way to think about the ways in which the war in Syria can bring together the Balkans and the Middle East is in terms of contemporary manifestations of empire building. Specifically, I am working here out of assumptions in the postcolonial literature which see global relations today as derivate of colonial expansion in the 19th and 20th century. More than this, the postcolonial perspective forces us to look at the ongoing impact of past colonialism and imperialism today in the form of institutions, identity categories, socio-economic hierarchies, and, most visibly, colonial-era borders. In particular I want to focus, *pax* Laffey and Nadarajah, on the role of violence in world politics that is both material, epistemic, and structural “and their joint role in imperialism’s shaping of people, places, and relations” (Laffey and Nadarajah 2016, 128). One area in particular I wish to draw attention to is how the war on terror – or more accurately the war *of* terror, for this is how it looks like to those at the receiving end of not just drone strikes but other more insidious programs – is the enforcement of national security projects by US agencies on to territories around the world.

It is worth briefly recalling what the war on terror has thus far entailed. The most obvious is the military aspect; that is, the defeating of groups deemed to threaten US security especially after the attacks of 9/11. At times this has also included the curtailing of the ability of ‘rogue states’ such as North Korea and Iran to reap fully the privileges of statehood in the international arena. Other scholars argue that the disregard for actual democracy promotion in the wake of the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, followed in the latter case by the implementation of pre-planned privatisation of the country’s resources, also points to the ways in which the war on terror went hand in hand with the expansion of neoliberalism (Gordon 2004). Through war, the US military has also been transformed into a highly networked structure with autonomous units carrying out assassinations and other policies deemed necessary to safeguard national interests (Niva 2013). The development of institutions concerned with waging the war on terror has also

¹¹ See ‘Prokuroria Speciale ngrit aktakuzë për terrorizëm ndaj katër aktivistëve të VV-së’, available at <https://telegrafi.com/prokuroria-speciale-ngrit-aktakuze-per-terrorizem-ndaj-kater-aktivisteve-te-vv-se/> [accessed 12 04 2018].



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seen the entrenchment of these very institutional interests fighting for its continuation to preserve their own privileges. As James Risen, former New York Times reporter who waged a seven-year battle with both the Bush and Obama administrations that tried to force him to testify and reveal his confidential sources in a leak investigation, has put it:

After so many years there's a whole class of people who have developed... a post 9/11 mercenary class that's developed that have invested in their own lives an incentive to keep the war going. Not just people who are making money but people who are in the government whose status and power are based on continuing the war...it wasn't just greed but also status power and ambition to make it so there's little debate about whether to continue to war...or a re-assessment.¹²

Under Obama the war on terror apparatus grew dramatically, says Risen, with his attack on whistle blowers and journalists a game-changing aspect of this, on top of the massive post 2001 expansion of surveillance globally but also domestically in the US. This 'terror industry' today, as I shall expand on later, now operates in a more institutionalised form through 'Countering Violent Extremism' programs. These programs have become important tools to standardize US security objectives in those places deemed to threaten US interests. Yet the expansion of such policies is nothing new – the U.S. military and civilian agencies have long been rethinking security practises in the context of globalized production and trade. "No longer lodged in a conflict between territorial borders and global flows" Crawford argues, "national security is increasingly a project of securing supranational systems" (Crawford 2010, 600).

Today the war on terror has evolved to encompass a range of civil society initiatives designed to 'Counter Violent Extremism'.¹³ In Albania, for example, the state has been actively aided by the US and NATO in working since 2016 to open the first of a kind centre 'against Violent Extremism' which aims to both study the phenomenon of foreign fighters and 'other violent extremist activity'. The government regularly hosts regional counterterrorism conferences with the US State Department, the latter of which has funded a host of programs in the country. In its own reports, Albania's Ministry of Internal Affairs has adopted the same language as the US' own CVE programs it employs domestically, suggesting close cooperation between the two. This mirrors the expansion of these programs globally "from Albania to Afghanistan, Canada to Cameroon, and Kenya to Kazakhstan" while the "Department of

¹² James Risen & Glenn Greenwald: "Pay Any Price," the War on Terror & Press Freedoms. Podcast. https://soundcloud.com/the_intercept/james-risen-glenn-greenwald-pay-any-price-the-war-on-terror-press-freedoms [accessed 11 04 2018]

¹³ A useful compilation of resources related to the expansion of this program since 2014 can be found here: <https://www.brennancenter.org/analysis/cve-programs-resource-page> [accessed 11 04 2018]



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State's budget for supporting locally-led CVE work abroad is higher than ever" (Glazzard and Rosand 2017). This despite the CVE agenda as promoted by the US (and indeed the UK in the form of 'Prevent') being challenged by academics on the grounds that both its scientific and logical basis are flawed, racist, counter-productive and largely superfluous considering the wide-ranging anti-terror laws which already exist (Kundnani 2015; Sian 2017; Sabir 2017)¹⁴ In Kosovo, too, the US embassy lobbied heavily for parliament to pass a law banning Kosovars from 'engaging in foreign wars' despite local opposition lambasting the vagueness of the laws that potentially criminalizes the engagement of Albanians volunteering to fight in potential wars in neighbouring states in the future.

In other words, these securitized frames created by the expansion of US war on terror logics positions local politicians as the native informants needed to discipline what are perceived as local displays of resistance to global counter insurgency initiatives. This was a role they readily took on. Kosovo's President at the time (in the context of massive global media coverage of the rise of ISIS) Atifete Jahjaga stressed that the country would "not allow itself to become a *shelter* of extremism"¹⁵ an odd construction considering the arrests of dozens of people and media hysteria concerned people wanting to *leave* the country and fight abroad. Later that year, this time in front of representatives from the EU's grand office designed to administer Kosovo (EULEX) and other foreign ambassadors Jahjaga was even starker about what the arrests meant: "our security institutions have demonstrated that they are able and prepared to act against this isolated and manipulated group, aligned with extremist groups, which consists a threat not only to the society of our state, but also beyond. Kosovo will never allow for groups as such to grow on its soil, and will never allow that its vales [sic] as a society, built for centuries, be shaken and endangered."¹⁶ This is all before legal proceedings had run their course. It was blind to the fact that among those accused were imams who had significant followings and who had themselves fought in Kosovo's insurgency against Serbia which secured the creation of the state of Kosovo.

They were not unknown and 'isolated' groups. Dismissing such speeches as merely platitudes designed for foreign consumption however would belie the deeper narratives of

¹⁴ For a useful resource, see here

<https://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/publications/Brennan%20Center%20CVE%20Report.pdf> [accessed 12 04 2018]

¹⁵ 'Arrested Imam Faces Terrorism Charges in Kosovo'. August 2014. Available at <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/arrested-imam-faces-terrorism-charges-in-kosovo> [accessed 12 04 2018]

¹⁶ Available at <http://www.president-ksgov.net/?page=2,8,3535> [accessed 12 04 2018]



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Kosovo's belonging in the world that form part of the myth-complex of a great many, though not all, contemporary political and intellectual actors in the country.¹⁷ The head of the largest opposition party at the time was even more crude in characterising those who had gone to Syria as having a "Religion [that] is being manifested through uniforms and beards, which don't resemble our citizens..."¹⁸ Kosovo's Prime Minister, Hashim Thaçi (in the midst of a major political crisis that threatened his party's reign on power) also framed the arrests he had helped to orchestrate to Germany's DW channel in these terms: "our orientation, of all our institutions, political parties, is clear – it is a Euroatlantic orientation...Kosovo is a new European country which will continue battling for the good against evil in everlasting partnership with the US."¹⁹ In all this we see the indigenous leaders taking on the role of disciplining a community of Muslims stigmatized as out of control and contributing to global insecurity. This was compounded by global media coverage of the arrests that helped to increase the notion of Kosovo and the wider Balkans as posing a unique threat in Europe.²⁰

The frequent stress upon Kosovo as a civilized state of 'rule of law' and terrorism needing to be fought connects in interesting ways to critical literatures on counterinsurgency. Counterinsurgency, Markus Kienscherf has argued, cuts "across the fields of liberal war and liberal rule, counterinsurgency doctrine aims to promote certain forms of species-life while combating those that are deemed dangerous. US counterinsurgency doctrine forms a programme of both liberal rule and liberal war whose ultimate purpose is the pacification of recalcitrant populations and their eventual (re)integration into the networks of liberal governance. Designed to promote 'safe' forms of life while eradicating 'dangerous' ones" (2011, 517). Considering that the lines between counterinsurgency and domestic policing of terrorism related issues is increasingly being blurred and "ultimately fail[s] to distinguish between civilians and combatants" (Sabir 2017, 205) it is increasingly clear that the designation

¹⁷ See Gorani 2011 for a richer discussion of ideas about 'returning to the West' that came to characterise the post-Communist discourses of Albanian politicians in Kosovo

¹⁸ 'Jihadist's Beheading Photos Shock Kosovo'. July 2014. Available at <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/albanian-jihadists-beheading-photos-spark-outrage> [accessed 12 04 2018]

¹⁹ 'Thaçi: Në Kosovë nuk ka vend për ekstremizëm'. August 2014. Available at <http://www.dw.com/sq/tha%C3%A7i-n%C3%AB-kosov%C3%AB-nuk-ka-vend-p%C3%ABr-ekstremiz%C3%ABm/a-17854631> [accessed 12 04 2018]

²⁰ See this BBC report: 'Kosovo 'imams held' in raids on Islamic State recruitment'. See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-29239534> [accessed 13 04 2018]. There was also this piece in the New York Times which was roundly dismissed by Balkan commentators as sensationalist. Carlotta Gall 'How Kosovo Was Turned Into Fertile Ground for ISIS', May 2016. See <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/22/world/europe/how-the-saudis-turned-kosovo-into-fertile-ground-for-isis.html> [accessed 13 04 2018].



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of suspects and the policing of these is increasingly being dictated by wider US agendas. This is particularly dangerous in the Balkans where locals are treated as incapable of fully exercising control in their territories and thus inviting outside ‘assistance’ that merely contributes to this notion being reinforced. Bosnia too, has also adopted a strategy ‘for preventing and combating terrorism’ that closely mirrors later efforts in Albania.²¹ These projects were aided by the US’ Department of Justice’s Office of Overseas Prosecutorial Development Assistance and Training Program funded by the Department of State. The Department of Justice also financed equipment and software to track traveller entries into Bosnia at 55 border crossings in the context of the ‘fight against terrorism’.²² Similar projects can be seen in Jordan where the US funded border monitoring equipment to counter infiltration by groups deemed extremist.²³ Bosnia has also passed a law on ‘foreign terrorist fighters’ as of July 2014 which discourages its citizens from travelling to fight abroad.

The US has also funded media organisations to combat online narratives in a move which again reproduces the Balkans as a European trouble-spot. One such example, ‘Resonate Voices’ part of the BIRN media group, argues on its website that “Balkan youth has been an easy target for extremists seeking to radicalise them and convince them to fight abroad, but now parents, activists and official Islamic organizations are striking back”.²⁴ This obscures a number of issues. For one, it is not clear what makes Balkan youth especially susceptible to radicalisation in the first place. In fact, figures from the UK, Belgium and France suggest many more have gone from there to fight in Syria and elsewhere. France has been the source of over 2000 fighters in Iraq and Syria²⁵ – more than Kosovo, Albania and Bosnia put together (with 5.7 million Muslims in France according to the Pew research centre, this would be roughly equivalent to the combined Muslim population of Bosnia, Kosovo and Albania). Despite the Balkans producing less fighters and official Islamic community structures possessing deep roots in society that can counteract messages from groups like ISIS, they are still subject to the same framing reminiscent of the types of works emanating in the 1990s that sought to portray the Balkans as a hotbed of religiously inspired extremism.

²¹ http://msb.gov.ba/PDF/STRATEGIJA_ZA_BORBU_PROTIV_TERORIZMA_ENG.pdf

²² <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/258249.pdf>

²³ See <https://www.counterextremism.com/countries/jordan> [accessed 12 04 2018]

²⁴ <http://resonantvoices.info/>

²⁵ Center for the analysis of Terrorism, “European Jihad Watch #4”,(Paris,Center for the Analysis of Terrorism,November2017)<http://cat-int.org/index.php/2017/11/30/european-jihad-watch-112017/?lang=en>



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In other words, and returning to Kienscherf, “liberal rule envisages security and development have merged into a potentially global strategy for the management of at-risk and risky populations” (Kienscherf 2011, 518). The Balkans, still deemed to sit at the margins of Europe and ‘western’ civilization are easily cast as at-risk populations. Yet there are also those profiteering off of the ‘terror industry’ which this benefits, including a plethora of local NGOs, intimately tied since the end of the Kosovo War with European and American capitals and receiving large donations to continue the CVE agenda. The agenda is apparent in Kosovo with funds allocated to organizations like the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies, the Jahjaga Foundation headed by former Kosovo President Atifete Jahjaga.²⁶ In Albania, local Islamic Community branches are recruited under the cover of inter-faith work to operate CVE programs²⁷. This is part of broader work being done in the country, since 2015, to map out potential threats in the country in a project supported by the US embassy in Albania.²⁸ When considered alongside the NATO-sponsored ‘counter-radicalisation’ centre in Albania, which will employ ‘soft measures’ to combat terrorism, it is clear that the Balkans are being treated with a double standard compared to Europe and seen as unable to govern their populations accordingly. The export of US CVE programs mirrors the transfer of counter-insurgency expertise across different geographies, a hardly is new phenomena. Indeed, as Professor Laleh Khalili’s has argued, the idea of ‘horizontal circuits’ in the colonial context centred precisely on the notion that techniques for suppressing dissent are transmitted across imperial endeavours (Khalili 2010; see also Silvestri 2010).

The Problematic Balkan Muslim

With this in mind we can thus situate the Balkans on a larger global plain of imperial growth. This should not be surprising. It has already been noted that the so-called war on terror never just about Iraq / Afghanistan and from the beginning the USA claimed the right to act anywhere that a terrorism-related threat was alleged to exist. The ‘war on terror’, Niva argues “increasingly resembles a global and possibly permanent policing operation in which targeted

²⁶ This is not to say all the work they do is beholden to US or EU funding agendas but merely to show how the war on terror has created opportunities for local organizations to compete for funding that may run parallels to donor agendas. As part of Women’s Week in March 2018 Jahjaga’s organization organized a panel on countering violent extremism, and has also done work to counteract ‘extremist’ messages in prisons.

²⁷ See <http://www.infoelbasani.al/myftinia-elbasan-organizoi-konferencen-bashke-kunder-ekstremizmit-te-dhunshem/> [accessed 13 04 2018]

²⁸ See also <http://idmalbania.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Religious-Radicalism-Albania-web-final.pdf>



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operations are used to manage populations and threats in lieu of addressing the social and political problems that produce the threats in the first place” (Niva 2013, 185). Bosnia is an interesting example, considering that the agreement to end the war in 1995 there has left a dysfunctional state incapable of working without European and US officials. The Syria War and the events surrounding this brought to the fore tired, old tropes from the 1990s about the country’s Muslims. The BBC’s Mark Urban was most crass in his presentation, describing Bosnian Muslims as not devout generally before warning that “small ideologically motivated group can have a big effect in changing a conflict...In Bosnia jihadists way of war defined from kidnap to beheading and religious desecration” (see www.youtube.com/watch?v=M6QIopgwuIU). It is unclear how these are quintessentially ‘jihadist’ ways of war, and one is left wondering how to describe Serbia’s actions during the 1990s, characterised as they were by desecration of religious sites, torture, mass rape, ethnic cleansing and indeed genocide.²⁹ Bosnia is also painted as ‘European and largely secular’, a trope which is part of a wider narrative of Bosnians and indeed other Balkan Muslims needing saving from themselves. The curious reference to the country “welcoming Israel tonight for a football game”, as if welcoming Israel – a state guilty of apartheid and settler colonial practises (Cohen 2001) – is today a European and largely secular value is both bizarre and ignores the wider mobilization in the country against the Israel football team’s presence in the country (www.youtube.com/watch?v=fQXhBkyYH64). Other issues, like the banal characterisation of Salafis as ‘strict Muslim’ also misses the nuances of inter-Salafi dynamics (Hafiz 2017). Perhaps the most bizarre quote can be attributed to France 24 which claims that with 300 Bosnians allegedly going to fight in Syria this gives the highest ratio in Europe (see www.youtube.com/watch?v=GVBou6cAbf0). This issue has already been discussed at length and debunked.³⁰

Moreover, in all this, we see how an earlier European colonial view that conceived of Balkan Muslims as mostly secular or non-practicing—the kind that the West need not fear—

²⁹ The only serious work to date on the presence of non-Bosnian Muslim fighters during the war in the 1990s is that of the excellent anthropologist Darryl Li (2014).

³⁰ A breakdown of figures can be seen here. As Kursani (2015, 24-26) notes “...the per capita numbers of foreign fighters do not cover the entire picture, and certainly do not speak much about the states most affected by the phenomenon of foreign fighters on a per capita basis... it is necessary to look at the number of foreign fighters per capita of their respective Muslim populations”. With this in mind, Kosovo ranked 14th in Europe and Bosnia 11th – behind countries like France, Sweden, Norway, Belgium and Finland. See http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/Report_inquiring_into_the_causes_and_consequences_of_Kosovo_citizens%27_involvement_as_foreign_fighters_in_Syria_and_Iraq_307708.pdf



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even today works to produce practicing Muslims as an *a priori* threat. As Piro Rexhepi notes “an Islam distinct from its other kinds, the Balkan Islam, according to such scholars, stands as secular, white, and European, against its darker and more fanatical counterpart located farther east and further back in time. (2017, 60). Rexhepi further argues that the tendency to view current manifestations of transnational Muslim engagements such as the so-called foreign fighter phenomenon has been “to present participants in these movements as victims of yet another wave of contaminating Islamist extremism imported from the Middle East” (2017, 66). In other words it is almost as if there is nothing indigenous about local Islamic practises that can be allowed to deviate from the narrative of largely secular Muslims living in the Balkans. Indeed, “Salafist interpretations and practices of Islam in the Balkans are routinely categorized as a strictly foreign intrusion from the Arab world—one that manifestly clashes with the local secular, or at least more centrist and moderate, Balkan Islam” (Rexhepi 2017, 66).

With this *longue durée* understanding of how Muslims in the Balkans have traditionally been viewed, we see that for the Albanians here – and indeed the Bosnians too – the reaction of local politicians in power to the Syria War is more understandable. Understanding their place in Europe as an otherised subject, they wished to be seen as the forces capable of disciplining their citizens who had gone ‘out of line’ by expending their energies on ‘foreign wars’. This despite the shortcomings international law itself facilitating such interventions:

Armed conflicts and mass atrocities have exposed a basic issue with formal international law: on the one hand, states are supposed to hold the ultimate authority over violence, yet on the other hand they continue to invoke ad hoc supra-state justifications for armed intervention, such as the International Community, humanity, and civilization. Under such circumstances, the call to jihad has served to rally alternative interventions, namely, nonstate armed solidarity efforts organized by relatively small numbers of activists dispersed throughout the Muslim world (Li 2009, 372).

The Syria War brought with it uncomfortable discussions local political elites had to contend with. I am referring here to the idea that Albanians are indeed Muslim and comfortably so, evidenced not just by the large number of people in attendance at congressional prayers, but also other indicators like the last census which showed well over 90% of Kosovars identify as Muslim.³¹ Such truths are deemed problematic by a segment of the political and intellectual elite. Enis Sulstarova has deftly deconstructed some of these racist and Islamophobic narratives inherent in the works of people like prominent Albanian novelist Ismail Kadare (2007), and we

³¹ See research by Pew.

http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/countries/kosovo#/?affiliations_religion_id=0&affiliations_year=2010®ion_name=All%20Countries&restrictions_year=2015 [accessed 11 04 2018].



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may also include frequent outbursts by politicians such as Kosovo's President Hashim Thaci who refuses to greet the Islamic Community's head for the Eid festival, or Ramush Haradinaj the current Prime Minister who on many occasions has denied Albanians were *really* Muslim and also openly offends local sensibilities by holding barbeques during the month of fasting (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wJ5AYX7trPk>). The vicious response seen to increased activism of Islamic actors in the wake of the Syria War thus provided an opportune time for the political elite to reassert their own credentials as reliable interlocutors between the rest of Europe and the Muslim communities of the Balkans. In this they were spurred on by local ambassadors.³² This response however was self-destructive in that it further stigmatized them in the eyes of other Europeans, while also playing on deeper anti-Muslim rhetoric countries like Serbia had used during the 1990s in attempting to present Bosnians and Albanians as in cahoots to turn Yugoslavia into a Muslim republic that would then march on Vienna and London (Rexhepi 2017, 62).

Conclusions

The perspectives offered here help us situate current machinations in Syria and the ramifications in the Balkans as part of a longer history of war destroying lives, for sure, but also making possible new connections. To situate this more deeply in history, we can recall the work of Leyla Amzi-Erdogdular who has noted that the Habsburg occupation of Bosnia in the 19th century did not in fact cut off Muslims here from the rest of the world and “the Muslim intellectual elite of Habsburg Bosnia Herzegovina, in addition to their new Eastern and Central European position, remained active in the Ottoman intellectual context, and that they considered themselves to be part of a broader community of the world's Muslims” (2017, 913). Moreover, it was not that the Bosnian Muslims merely reacted to events in the broader Muslim world but they “also influenced and shaped the broader Muslim modernist discourse” (Leyla 2017, 914). Similarly, Albanians and Bosniak engagement with the Syria War – and not just with the outbreak of ISIS – led to deep discussions inside Kosovo, Albania and Macedonia about concepts like just war, self-defence, the state of the Muslim ummah (transnational body of believers) today and more (Sadriu 2017). The idea of a sharp break between ‘European

³² Tracie Anne Jacobson, then US ambassador to Kosovo, frequently welcomed the ‘anti-terror’ raids in 2014 despite local commentators denouncing the sensationalist and politicized nature of these events. See Sadriu 2017.



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Islam' of the Balkans and the rest of the world is thus problematic to say the least. Yet, this idea of the separation of Muslims in the Balkans from the rest of the Muslim world "is not recent. It dates back to at least the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, that is, to colonial and nationalist narratives, where synchronizing Muslims in the Balkans with the historical timeline and space of Europe was a political goal" (Rexhepi 2017, 55). By exploring these linkages we can avoid the fallacy of arbitrary scholarly borders which neatly demarcates research focusing on the Balkans as separate from broader Middle Eastern studies contexts (Amzi-Erdogdular 2017, 914). The Syria War and the activism here to look at how actors challenge these notions and "explore histories and subjectivities of those who saw their lived experiences not in relation to Europe, but as constitutive parts of the Muslim world" (Rexhepi 2017, 54-55). In fact these imams and other mobilization around the Syria War shatters the notion of 'Balkan Islam' "as discontinuous from neighbours further east and south also reinforces a notion of these lands and communities as separate and distinct from other former Ottoman lands, such as the Levant or Egypt" (Rexhepi 2017, 55). In producing the Balkans as distinct from Europe, the Balkans becomes intimately tied to the Middle East; yet, it is clear that 'the rest of Europe' itself is no longer detached from here – neither is it immune from the implications of war and has fared no better in containing the fallout of the war on terror.

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